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3-10-2009

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Lee, Haiyan, "Mo Yan, Inaugural Newman Laureate, Honored in Oklahoma" (2009). *The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012*. 502.
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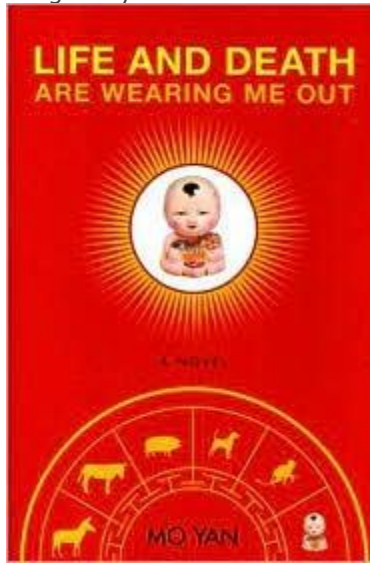
Mo Yan, Inaugural Newman Laureate, Honored in Oklahoma

March 10, 2009 in [In Case You Missed It](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [No comments](#)

By Haiyan Lee

On Thursday, March 5, the acclaimed Chinese novelist Mo Yan received the inaugural [Newman Prize for Chinese Literature](#) at a ceremony held on the campus of the University of Oklahoma in Norman. Over a hundred invited guests attended the event, including the Chinese consul from Houston, the Oklahoma secretary of state, OU's deans of arts and sciences, OU faculty, high school teachers, students, alumni, visitors, and donors.

The Newman Prize was created in 2008 in OU's Institute for U.S.-China Issues at the initiative of its director Peter H. Gries, Professor of political science and author of *China's New Nationalism*, who sought my collaboration as consultant and jury coordinator. Our vision was to award the prize bien



ennially in recognition of outstanding achievement in prose or poetry by a living author writing in Chinese. Last summer, we assembled a jury of seven distinguished literary experts who nominated seven candidates, read their representative works, and selected the winner in a transparent voting process (details are available [here](#)).

As the inaugural laureate, Mo Yan received a commemorative medallion, a certificate, and \$10,000. The prize is the first major American award for Chinese literature. Speaking at the award ceremony, Peter Gries retold the story Lu Xun's conversion to literature that he first encountered at Middlebury College in the "Preface to *Nahan/Call to Arms*" and called the prize his "call-to-arms": "It is my hope that the prize will contribute to increased American awareness of the tremendous diversity and humanist spirit of contemporary Chinese literature, and help generate goodwill in U.S.-China relations."

Mo Yan was nominated by the prominent translator Howard Goldblatt, who also translated his latest and winning novel *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*. "Of all the facets of Mo Yan's oeuvre that have made him one of China's foremost novelists and an internationally renowned figure—from diverse writing styles to his remarkable imagery and brilliant use of language—for me it is his historical imagination, an ability to create an alternative human history, that sets him apart from his peers. Artistry and humanity blend seamlessly in novels and stories that will be read and enjoyed well into the future," said Howard Goldblatt last September. The novel was [fondly reviewed by Jonathan Spence](#) for the *New York Times Book Review* in May 2008, who considered it "wildly visionary and creative."

In addition to attending the award ceremony and giving a moving acceptance speech, Mo Yan also visited several high schools in Norman, Oklahoma City, Moore, and Tulsa. Prior to the visits, the students had read a short story by Mo Yan entitled "[Soaring](#)" about a young woman literally taking

flight in order to escape an arranged marriage. An essay contest was held and an exchange student from Kosovo emerged as the first winner of the Newman Young Writers Award. In front of his eager youthful audiences, Mo Yan read from his story (with Howard Goldblatt reading the translation) and engaged in a spirited Q&A with me as interpreter. The discussions ranged from the symbolism of dog's blood to the meaning of life.

A symposium was also held on March 5 featuring presentations by Howard Goldblatt, Alexander Huang (Pennsylvania State University), Liu Hongtao, and myself. Together we discussed Mo Yan's creative career and his contributions to modern Chinese literature. In place of a keynote speech, Mo Yan opted for a more casual style, regaling the audience with witty remarks and juicy anecdotes about writing, censorship, Hollywood movies, and his friend Zhang Yimou. He revealed that he had offered a proposal to Zhang for the 2008 Beijing Olympics opening ceremony. Zhang adopted its gist without, however, giving him due credit. "If the Olympics were to come to China again," bragged Mo Yan, "I'd become a director myself."

The inaugural jury consisted of seven jurors based in the U.S., Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. They were: Kirk Denton (Ohio State University), Howard Goldblatt (University of Notre Dame), Liu Hongtao (Beijing Normal University), Peng Hsiao-yen (Academia Sinica, Taiwan), Xu Zidong (Lingnan University, Hong Kong), Zhang Yiwu (Beijing University), and Zhao Yiheng (Sichuan University). They nominated the following seven writers and representative works: Yan Lianke's *Dreams of Ding Village* (2006), Mo Yan's *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* (2006), Jin Yong's *The Deer and the Cauldron* (1969-1972), Zhu Tianxin's *Old Capital* (1997), Wang Anyi's *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* (2000), Wang Meng's *The Transformer* (1985), and Ning Ken's *The City of Masks* (2001).

The nominees included well-established maestros as well as rising stars based in mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. The genres and themes were wide-ranging: from magical realist renditions of the Chinese countryside caught up in the turmoil of land reforms and market reforms, a historical panorama that both crowns and radically revises the martial-arts novel tradition, a postcolonial exploration of city and memory, an epic portrayal of modern Shanghai as condensed in the life of a former Miss Shanghai turned petty urbanite, and a satire about the predicament of the semi-colonial intellectual, to Internet-installment fiction about drifters and seekers. The diversity and strength of the nominations posed a great challenge for the jury. Yet Mo Yan emerged as the consensus winner after four rounds of positive elimination voting.

The Newman Prize honors Harold J. and Ruth Newman, whose generous endowment of a chair at the University of Oklahoma enabled the creation of the Institute for U.S.-China Issues. OU is also home to *World Literature Today*, a leading journal of world literature, and the Neustadt International Prize for Literature, which served as our model. A special section of the July issue of *WLT*, guest-edited by myself, will be dedicated to Mo Yan; it will feature his acceptance speech, newly translated short fiction, and the symposium essays. In 2010, a new jury will be assembled to select a poet as the next Newman laureate.

Stay tuned.

Tags: Mo Yan